

KINDLING THE FLAME

PROMOTING MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL BEING

"The Mary G Style"

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Hello friends, guests and others who have come here today to talk about, and listen to people talk about mental health and well being and what media does and can play in the good spirit of feeling good.

"There is no greater sorrow on earth than the loss of one's native land." - Euripides 431 B.C.

Welcome/History

First and foremost I have a cultural obligation to acknowledge that this country I speak at today is the Noongar people's country. A beautiful and powerful region of WA that has been a place of great importance to many people from fruit growers, farmers, miners, politicians, families and most importantly a great sector of Aboriginal people that make up the southwest region and a part of the greater state of WA making up a diverse Indigenous community. This in itself, acknowledging country is a very important process that assists the right people in suppressing the possible burdens of mental health and well-being. This gives back a sense of power to those who have been affected by loss of country or a loss of status in ones own country.

The Noongar people, like all Aboriginal people throughout Australia, have been the victims of the development, colonisation and progress of this part of the state and have become over time a minority, with most to offer other nations within the great south west. Unfortunately like everywhere else, respect, acknowledgment and empowerment of these keepers of this land have been ostracised, demonised and become victims of a system that seemed to have failed a very basic principle and that is the principle of right of place. The very gift from God/creator, nature and the land that makes them, like me, nothing else but Aboriginal. I acknowledge Noongar land.

I first of all am a Kitja man from the Kimberley. My skin is Jowandi and I have lost my language, traditional culture and until recently identity. A brief explanation of skin is that in traditional society, who I am to marry is already determined before my grandmother is born. A hard thing to comprehend but this is the genius of engineering created by Aboriginal people to protect future generations by prevention of interbreeding. Why and how some of you may ask, did I lose my language, traditional culture and until recently identity, well my mother was a stolen generation woman, who was taken from her traditional Aboriginal mother at the tender age of 3 years old. Why? Well, that is a failure of our society.

So throughout my talk today, I ask please to not let the clothes I wear, the style of my speech or the words I choose to use, fool you, as inside in me, in my heart and mind I am actually a result of our/my country's Social Experiment. I have mental, spiritual and emotional scars that will go with me to my grave. These scars are what moulded me into the character of who I am here today. I have luggage, perhaps suitcases inherited by my past in which I had no influence over but just **became** .

"The history of colonization, and its aftermath, including the forced removal of children, has been the most significant reason for today's picture of Aboriginal health and other problems. The evidence is overwhelming of the effects of loss of culture, land, voice, population, parents and children" Professor Fiona Stanley Director of Telethon Institute and 2003 Australian of the year.

So many Aboriginal children have a wounded soul from the layers of grief and loss, yet so many of these children can still experience the joy in life and warm our hearts" Aboriginal psychiatrist Dr Helen Milroy.

So what does it mean to be Aboriginal? It should have in the past signified pride, identity, respect, and all the beautiful things that make up the great grace of the human world. This is what Aboriginal people had. But when a race becomes oppressed and kept in a place of the deepest abyss of minimal self-empowerment and eminence, then what we have is a group of fellow man - fellow Australians, kept in a place of emptiness.

The psychological affects of this are a sense of worthlessness, hopelessness, helplessness and despair. This is also a generational obsession that has shown its ugly face over at least four generations of human family. This is a very hard place to escape from. In the western world it is understood that if the environment, place or location is having a negative destructive effect on ones life, you either change it or leave. But the Aboriginal people do not have the luxury of this option, as a basic fundamental aspect of their identity and essence prevents them from either changing it or leaving.

They are a minority; they are connected to a place, like a tree is connected to the ground via its roots. They are not going anywhere! They cannot go anywhere! This is the difference between Indigenous people and Westernised people. So by not being able to change their situation or leave they become a part of the shadows of the country that is very seldom looked at, appreciate and recognised. This is the danger as a society that we fall into.

This is the failure of the responsibility of our society, our state, and our nation. So what have we created here, we have created a sub- culture within our very communities, under our very own noses and yet we still tend to just turn the other cheek and pretend that we do not see it or want to see it.

Why? Because as a society we do not understand, we do not comprehend, at times we do not care! Or we care as long as it does not affect our lives, not our problem perhaps. But whilst this attitude continues and whilst the ignorance prevails we commend members of our community, our country, into a state of emptiness. Sometimes our broader community are not even aware what they are doing to people.

Intro of Radio/TV Media

This is the passion that grew inside of me, the passion to assist in the empowerment of our people. They needed a voice that would give them hope. A voice that would ease the burden and pain of being a minority, unwanted group of our community. A character was born from within the depths of my spirit world, my soul, and my liarn. I did not sit and calculate a strategy or a character to carryout a role within our community to attempt to massage, need and stimulate a greater affection to life. It happened one night when I was alone in a radio studio in Broome.

Back in 1992, a woman character for radio was born; this was done by pure accident, through sadness. The radio studio can be a very lonely, quiet place at times and you talk and talk to the world but you do not know who is listening, or if there is anyone listening at all. The character "Mary G" was based on women around me that I had grown up with and who had influenced me. These women were predominantly women who had been affected by the removal from land, country, family, language, and culture and identify.

What I was not conscious of at the time was what the impact, popularity and ownership of the character meant to grass roots people. This was an absolute accident. What the main factor was here though, was the power of the medium I was using, the power of radio.

As a volunteer radio presenter and through a late night show I was doing on my own, unaware of who was listening, I started talking to myself and created a fictitious character who basically gave me a hard time and told tall stories about women in the community who she had grown up with and also got into mischief with. With the popularity of the character growing enormously, I began to talk about social issues such as domestic violence and alcohol and substance abuse.

I spoke as an authoritarian, an elder Indigenous woman who commanded attention and respect and the community started to sit up and listen, and also to mimic the messages that I was giving out. I have to admit here, at this point that I was not really aware of the effect and impact it was having on the community.

It was at this point I realised the importance of Media and its role within the Indigenous community. The power to influence peoples lives and thinking for the betterment of the community as a whole. I now felt that I had a responsibility, due to this popularity, to continue to bring about awareness of the social issues that are continuing to affect our Indigenous community.

Prominent issues like well being and the negative position that Aboriginals had found themselves in actually became a subconscious effort on my behalf to stimulate peoples mind despite the miserable conditions and positions we live in, we can still rise above this through a good feeling about who we are as Aboriginal people. Issues such as Mental Health and Well Being, until recently, had been taboo to discuss and people in the community who suffered from illness like low self esteem, disempowerment, isolation, sterilisation, helplessness and hopelessness can escape for that moment of the radio show.

The radio show gave back a sense of relevance to those who were either in denial or were sent away to hospitals in which they were isolated from family and unable to get better due to the absence of family, country and culture.

There are many factors that can be attributed to the current issue of mental wellbeing in Indigenous people. For instance, the stolen generation and the impact this has had not just on the children who were removed, but also on the generations to follow. The fact remains that the current government had refused to apologise for this and accept that it was wrong. Just in the doing of this, would have brought about reconciliation and healing and a feeling of closure so these people can move on.

Indigenous people are still a minority in their own country and still feel like second-class citizens. There is still that feeling of hopelessness. The impending change to CDEP and the enormous effect this is going to have on our Indigenous community is also going to cause a lot of distress.

We now know that these play a very important role in the emotional wellbeing of Indigenous people. Also, this is a much more accepted illness within the wider community now and people have a better understanding of it and are more tolerant to some degree. I am not sure whether there is an actual increase in episodes of mental and social wellbeing or whether it is just that there is more of an opportunity for people to come forward and be counted rather than hiding in obscurity.

Health promotions has certainly played a part in bringing about awareness of this illness and this must continue to happen through the various medical centres that service our Indigenous community. We must continually look at new strategies through health promotions that are relevant to our Indigenous clients and also address the various age groups, genders and

varying social issues within the specific communities.

As Mary G, through my weekly national radio show and any other medium I have access to, I will continue to highlight the issues that are affecting our people as I feel I have a responsibility to do this. Being popular on a national level is not just about having fun and travelling to wonderful places and meeting wonderful people. It is also about using these opportunities to highlight issues such as mental health and wellbeing, especially if the audience consists of people who have the ability to make a difference.

Moving into television and creating the Mary G Show for SBS has had such a dynamic impact on Indigenous Australia as it allowed Aboriginal people to feel, hear and see their voice being expressed on national TV. The transition from radio to TV has been a natural progression that has been able to empower and stimulate a sense of pride in us as Aboriginal people. The combining element that has made the Mary G character a success is the unique partnership between Radio and TV, including videos, commercials and live performance.

A sense of trust and inspiration has given Mary G the ability to tap into ones conscious and sub conscious minds bringing a sense of freedom from ones daily negative environment. To be able to use the media as a promotional tool and to also give back power so people can take responsibility for themselves, has demonstrated to me a success, where generational children who are now adults have used and quoted Mary G to their community, children and even back to irresponsible elders.

The secret, now the secret, or the formula should I reveal it here, should I patent the concept, (laugh) that's a thought, it's very simple. One needs to go back to the basics and talk, express and communicate at grass roots level. The tools of media are just that, Tools. But the combination of media, mediums and language is the key. One additional important aspect is also, who I am, or who you are and where you fit in. Your history, and most importantly, your credibility.

Example I do not have a history of Alcohol abuse, Drug usage, domestic violence etc because my Indigenous community is always watching and always judging. I learnt this at a very young age and in my young later life worked out that the convergence of all of these things gave me the power and capacity to be a respected, credible voice for the Indigenous community whilst not being over political or grandstanding.

The impact of the use of radio has had a major effect on me personally, like prisoners who write letters to Mary G seeking advise or the young woman in QLD who wrote to me saying that she was suicidal and depressed, then she turned on the radio and Mary G was talking about domestic violence in which she was a victim. Mary G changed her life forever by touching into her soul and giving back her wellbeing and zest to continue to be a survivor and no longer a victim. She lives today because of the use of Media in a state of Mental Depression. Or the handful of petrol Sniffers who were totally incapable of holding a conversation and had not spoken for 3 months, became guests on the radio show and their psychologist on their departure says that they spoke more in twenty minutes than in the last 3 months.

Media has allowed me to tap into a symptom called the "comfort zone" of Indigenous Australians. Basically, everyone has a comfort zone. This is a state of mind where people are surrounded by that which is FAMILIAR. Familiarity breeds complacency, which can keep you from taking the action necessary to achieve your goals, because that action introduces uncertainty into your life - something the comfort zone likes to keep at bay. Aboriginal people feel they are safe in their "comfort zone" which is Country and family.

Unfortunately the recognition of the role media plays in my case has at times been a frustrating journey as some bodies' (government etc) see what I do as just radio or just TV. Yet when it comes to introducing for example a cyclone advertisement for FESA and the huge

impact it has, they see the impact and seem to not be able to comprehend that the character is real and has a matriarch image that the Indigenous community understand, celebrate and enjoy whilst still experience and hearing the importance of the message. Media can and does influence people's lives, thinking and understanding. Mary G brings a culturally appropriate style that allows the Indigenous people to see, feel and accept the show, the character and the format is not foreign.

The mind is a complex thing and Mary G has been able to wriggle into a place that activates a positive outlook in Indigenous people and non-indigenous people. A sense of well being in which one celebrates and smiles at life, in a positive way, even if it is for a small period. I have been doing radio since 1992 and have continued as a volunteer radio presenter, not for the celebrity status, not for the accolades, obviously not for the financial returns - there is none, but for the simple fact that my Indigenous people, despite the conditions, suffering and environment they are in, I give them that chance to escape into a world. Another world where Mary G has struck a chord with them, their children, their elders, their deceased, their country, their hearts and most importantly their minds.

In wrapping up I would like to sum up very quickly that the Mary G Character and the various mediums of media, to me is treated and respected as tools to make a difference in people's lives. A tool that allows you into peoples minds, hearts and spirit so that you can tap into a place inside of them to contribute and prevent an essence that prevents the potential of mental illness and create a positive well being in all.

60 secs make up a minute; 60 minutes make up 1 hour. There are many degrees of mental health and some times the greatest contributor to this thing called mental health is our failure as humans to listen, learn and communicate with each other.

Mark Bin Bakar

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